CONTEMPORARY KERALA AND THE PRODUCTION OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITIES

Synopsis

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RESEARCH GUIDE

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Synopsis

Introduction

This thesis investigates the contemporary manifestations of hegemonic masculinity in 21st-century Kerala[1]. Hegemonic masculinity, in Kerala, is constructed against a set of non-hegemonic, marginalised masculinities such as Dalit masculinities, lower-class masculinities and homosexual masculinities. This thesis focuses on the relational and discursive 'production' of vernacular/local/regional forms of masculinities in popular media and in the daily lives of men by studying cultural texts like internet memes, regional movies as well as ethnographic fields. This study discusses the performative aspect of masculinities and the various sociocultural contingencies that enable and enforce masculine performatives.

Masculinity is a set of socially constructed patterns of behaviours, attitudes and temperaments expected to be performed by men. Masculinity is not synonymous with patriarchy nor is it a corollary to femininity[2]. Social institutions like caste, class, race, religion, and ethnicity invariably interact with the imagining of masculinity. In this sense, masculinity is an intersectional construction. Research on masculinity shows that there is no universal way to define it. Rather, masculinity exists in multiple forms in different cultures, taking shape under varied sociopolitical, economic, and cultural circumstances.

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[1] Kerala is a state in South India. It is bordered by Karnataka to the north and northeast, by Tamil Nadu to the east and south, and by the Arabian Sea to the west. With 33 million inhabitants as per the 2011 census, Kerala is the 13th largest Indian state by population. It is divided into 14 districts, with the capital being Thiruvananthapuram. Malayalam is the most widely spoken language and the state's official language.

[2] Praseeda Gopinath and Pavitra Sundar, "Introduction: Masculinities," *South Asian Popular Culture* 18, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 1, https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2020.1736819.

This study attempts to answer the following questions. How is masculinity manifested in contemporary Kerala and what mechanisms are involved in its production? How do new modes of communication in the digital age influence the self-fashioning of masculinity among young men in Kerala? How have recent developments in Malayalam regional cinema contributed to the redefining of hegemonic masculinity in the region? How does bonding among men act as a crucial dynamic through which hegemonic masculinity is shaped in Kerala? What are the various micro acts through which hegemonic masculinity is legitimised and maintained in contemporary Kerala?

Aims

One of the aims of this study is to investigate the gendering in and through digital media platforms. Early research in this field primarily explored the construction of and experimentation with gender identities in digital media. Much of the scholarship has concentrated on how gender is represented and evaluated on digital platforms, with a particular emphasis on youth, women, and, girls in Western contexts. Recently, there has been growing interest in examining older femininities, masculinities, and gender diversity in relation to digital media. Contemporary research on new media also focuses on the interaction of race, ethnicity, and sexuality with the process of gendering.

Over the past three decades, digital media has become increasingly prevalent worldwide, profoundly affecting various aspects of human life. The advent of Web 2.0, particularly Social Networking Sites (SNS), has significantly accelerated this trend over the last decade. Web 2.0, which emerged in 1999, denotes the evolution of the internet towards greater user engagement and content creation, replacing the more passive user experience of Web 1.0. This shift has transformed the social dimension of the internet, enabling users to interact by sharing thoughts, perspectives, and opinions through tagging, sharing, posting,

commenting, and liking. Given these developments, there is an increasing need for research that focuses on men's interactions with digital media. Masculinity research on social media in the context of Kerala is still in its infancy.

Another aim of this thesis is to examine how regional cinema impacts the construction of masculinity. Malayalam cinema serves as a significant platform for representing and negotiating masculinity. Regional cinema plays a crucial role in both legitimising and questioning various practices associated with masculinity in Kerala. This region has been extensively studied with regard to the influence of films on cultural modes of gender expression. Existing studies demonstrate that cinema, as a popular form of entertainment, perpetuates and reinforces existing gender norms. It upholds patriarchal norms and institutions, such as heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, and marriage, while, also perpetuating gender stereotypes. By normalising patriarchal institutions through reaffirming conventional gender roles and actively stigmatising and excluding non-normative gender identities, cinema has a significant impact on people's lived experiences. This study focuses on recent experiments in Malayalam cinema that have challenged the stereotypical representation of gender and masculinity.

This thesis also investigates the production of vernacular/regional forms of masculinity through homosocial bonding between men in rural Kerala. Homosocial bonds between men play a crucial role in legitimising and reaffirming dominant notions of masculinity. Homo-sociality refers to social relationships formed within the same gender. The concept of homo-sociality is commonly employed in men's and masculinities studies to examine 'male cultures', men's heterosexual relationships, and hegemonic masculinity. Research on homo-sociality shows that the practise of male bonding encourages gender segregation of men and women, as well as establishing the distinctions between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities.

Gender segregation between men and women is primarily achieved by excluding women when building social relationships. Furthermore, men's circles frequently maintain a code of behaviour that conforms to the practise of hegemonic masculinity, resulting in the segregation of different types of masculinities that are hierarchically positioned according to power and privilege. A section of this thesis addresses this issue while analysing an all-male collective from rural Kerala.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative research methodology. Content analysis is used to examine the contents of films, internet memes, and other non-literary cultural texts. Cultural studies has been crucial in positioning this work within a multidisciplinary framework, considering, the distinct set of texts it analyses. Cultural studies enables the researcher to emphasise the 'everyday' experiences of people. In other words, research in cultural studies is structured by an interest in the interplay between lived experience, texts, discourses and the social context[3]. It recognises that all forms of cultural artefacts such as advertisements, foods, fashion choices, and music are endowed with cultural meanings. These embedded meanings are always in conversation with contemporary structures of power and hegemony.

Visual analysis is another important methodological tool used in this research. Digital culture is predominantly visual, and this method has been useful in locating important interpretative cues within images or videos. This method is predominantly used in this thesis to interpret internet memes and movie scenes. This method allows the researcher to pay attention to the stylistic features of a meme, such as the selection of the image in the meme, and various editing techniques used, including the use of Photoshop and sketching. These

[3] Paula Saukko, "Combining Methodologies in Cultural Studies," in *Doing Research in Cultural Studies* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2003), https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849209021.

features are closely linked to the meme messages that creators wish to impart. Visual analysis is also used to interpret frames from movies by focusing on camera movements and angles that are important aspects of visual communication.

Ethnography has been used in this thesis as a methodological tool for investigating masculinity. Ethnographic studies on masculinity recognise the significance of 'social space' in shaping contemporary forms of gender expression. Ethnography involves immersing oneself in naturally unfolding events and, carefully observing, interpreting, and understanding the significance attributed to these events by those who participate in and constitute these events. Ethnographic writing aims to create a structured narrative based on firsthand observations and insights from the field. This research, especially in the sixth chapter, takes recourse to 'autoethnography'[4] to study a homosocial men's group in Kerala. The researcher has assumed the role of a 'participant' in recording and interpreting ethnographic information. Adopting such a method has been fruitful in decoding the nuances of the cultural spaces under investigation and the people in them. Being part of the group under study, the researcher was able to analyse the observations made without misinterpreting the cultural and linguistic codes.

'Informal interviews' are used here as a method to collect data. An informal interview refers to a friendly conversation between the researcher and research participants, primarily in a routine social setting[5]. The conversations facilitated by informal interviews are useful for

[4] Autoethnography is a genre of academic writing that draws on and analyses or interprets the lived experiences of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practises, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues.

[5] Jon Swain and Brendan King, "Using Informal Conversations in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21 (April 1, 2022): 16094069221085056, https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221085056.

qualitative exploration in everyday settings where talking takes place. Sometimes informal conversations are not only the best way, but they are the only way to generate data[6].

Review of literature.

Masculinities studies

Academic interest in *masculinity* as a lens to interpret contemporary culture has a two-decade-long history in Kerala. In the early years of the 21st century, there was a sudden upsurge of works that focused on the concept of *masculinity* in Kerala. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan links this to a series of academic endeavours that brought masculinity to the forefront[7]. A series of conferences titled 'Travelling seminars on masculinities' is one among them. One of the first public discussions on masculinity in Kerala took place in a workshop that was organised at Kerala University (Thiruvananthapuram) as part of the "Travelling seminars". One of the first works on masculinity emerged from this conference. The publication of *From Violence to Supportive Practices: Family, Gender, and Masculinity in India*[8] was a result of these seminars. This was an important report on supportive practises among men. The first round of workshops was organised in 2002 at five universities across India. The publication of two volumes dedicated to masculinity, Sanjay Srivastava's *Sexual Sites, Seminal Attitudes: Sexualities, Masculinities, and Culture in South Asia*[9] (2004) and *South Asian Masculinities: Context of*

[6] Jon Swain and Brendan King posit that two distinct types of informal conversations can be used as data, which are *observed conversations* and *participatory conversations*. Observed conversations refer to those that are overheard or that occur during researchers' observations during fieldwork. Participatory conversations refer to those that involve an interactive dialogue between the researcher and another person or other people.

[7] Ratheesh Radhakrishnan, "Masculinity and the Structuring of Public Domain in Kerala: A History of the Contemporary." (Bangalore, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, 2006), 22.

[8] UNIFEM South Asia Regional Office Delhi New, *From Violence to Supportive Practice: Family, Gender, and Masculinities in India* (United Nations Development Fund for Women, South Asis [sic] Regional Office, 2002).

[9] Sanjay Srivastava, *Sexual Sites, Seminal Attitudes: Sexualities, Masculinities and Culture in South Asia* (SAGE, 2004).

Change, Sites of Continuity[10], jointly edited by Radhika Chopra, Caroline Osella, and Filippo Osella (2004), was also crucial in this regard. Ratheesh points out that the interest in masculinity as a central aspect of academic enquiry in Kerala parallels this moment.

Masculinity studies has been incorporated into studies on matriliny, modernity, queer studies, film studies, liberalisation, Gulf migration, communism and, queer movements in Kerala. Parveena Kodoth's article titled "Shifting the Ground of Fatherhood: Matriliny, Men and Marriage in Early Twentieth Century Malabar"[11] examines the role of reforms on matriliny and its relationship with the refiguring of the male figure in 20th-century Malabar. She argues that the "father as a distinct masculine identity was premised on the reconstitution of norms of female sexuality and male conjugal responsibility within, a framework of closely wrought patriarchal marriage. Female sexuality, including women's mobility, was re-wrought so that women could 'properly' be wives, in a relationship with men, that would be marked by the exchange of dependence (the underside being obedience) and protection. Redefinition of sexuality was crucial to the production of women's 'moral' commitment to the conjugal family, going far beyond sexual restraint to being a disciplining social force"[12]. In this situation, the role of the husband is contrasted with that of the *Karanavar* (the much-maligned oldest male member and executor of property in a matrilineal family interpreted by the civil courts as its head).

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[10] Radhika Chopra, Caroline Osella, and Filippo Osella, *South Asian Masculinities: Context of Change, Sites of Continuity* (Women Unlimited an associate of Kali for Women, 2004).

[11] Praveena Kodoth, "Shifting the Ground of Fatherhood: Matriliny, Men and Marriage in Early Twentieth Century Malabar," *Centre for Development Studies*, 2004, http://192.168.2.12:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/257.

[12] Kodoth, 1.

J Devika, in her article titled *Imagining Women's Social Space in Early Modern Keralam*[13], argues that "the formation of modern gender identities in late 19th and early 20th Century Kerala was deeply implicated in the project of shaping governable subjects who were, at one and same time, `free' and already inserted into modern institutions. Because gender appeared both `natural' and `social', both `individualised' and `general', it appeared to be a superior form of social order compared to the established Jati-based ordering". According to her, the reform period in Kerala in the early years of the twentieth century was a moment of engendering, when certain qualities were represented as "masculine" and "feminine".

A few ethnographic studies during the early 2000s brought discussions on masculinity to the forefront of Kerala. The most prominent is Caroline and Filippo Osella's work "Friendship and Flirting: Micro-Politics in Kerala, South India,"[14] where they examine the role of male-male friendship as a dynamic through which caste-class hierarchies are altered in Kerala. They also examine 'teenage romance' and flirting as social arenas in which masculine performances are structured in Kerala. The role of homosocial bonding between men in shaping various forms of masculinity is the focus of this study.

Most research on gender in South Asia until the early 2000s focused on issues of femininity, particularly social inequality and women's disempowerment. There was an increasing recognition that equal attention should be given to studies on masculinities to understand the structuring of gender relations. Caroline Osella, Filippo Osella, and Radhika Chopra's edited volume *South Asian Masculinities: Context of Change, Sites of Continuity*[15] is

[13] J. Devika, *Imagining Women's Social Space in Early Modern Keralam*, Working Paper Series 329 (Centre for Development Studies, 2002).

[14] Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella, "Friendship and Flirting: Micro-Politics in Kerala, South India," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4 (June 1, 1998), https://doi.org/10.2307/3034499.

[15] Chopra, Osella, and Osella, *South Asian Masculinities*.

a valuable intervention in this aspect. Taking their lead from Lindisfarne and Cornwall[16], their work on *Dislocating Masculinity* (1994), seeks to unpack and document the complex ways in which various types of masculinities are both socially and culturally constructed and articulated. This volume also examines how masculinities impact each other, forcing new masculinities to emerge. The influence of ethnography as a methodological tool to investigate masculinity was crucial for this volume.

Some of the most significant studies on masculinity have occurred in the context of Malayalam regional cinema in Kerala. Jenny Rowena's doctoral dissertation titled "Reading Laughter: The Popular Malayalam 'Comedy-Films' of the Late 80s and Early 90s" [17]studies the rise and popularity of *chiripadam*[18] *or* comedy films in the latter half of the 20th century in Kerala. She discusses the role of the sidekick in Malayalam regional cinema, usually constructed as the comic non-hegemonic 'other' of the hero, to discuss issues related to the representation of masculinity. Her analysis of the Mohanlal-Sreenivasan[19] combo in a series of films critically examines how the hegemonic masculine ideal was imagined in Malayalam cinema, often in contrast to the non-hegemonic, lower caste-class 'alternative hero' figures like Sreenivasan. She also discusses what she calls 'buddy films' of the 1990s, which focus on male

[16] Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne, *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies* (Taylor & Francis, 2016).

[17] Jenny Rowena, "Reading Laughter: The Popular Malayalam 'Comedy-Films' of the Late 80s and Early 90s." (The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad), accessed April 8, 2024, https://www.academia.edu/61209674/Reading_Laughter_The_Popular_Malayalam_Comedy_films_of_the_Late_80s_and_Early_90s.

[18] A set of films that focused on humour and laughter started trickling into the Malayalam cinematic scene in the early 80s. These films, which came to be called *thamaashappadangal* or *chirippadangal* ("comedy-films" or "laughter-films") in popular parlance, fully established themselves by the early 90s. Most of these films were about educated, unemployed young men and their comic struggles to make a livelihood somehow or the other. Many of them were made on very low budgets and featured relatively less-known artistes. Yet, they went on to become huge successes.

[19] Mohanlal and Sreenivasan are two actors who work predominantly in the Malayalam film industry. This duo was part of a series of films that came out during the late 1990s to early 2000s. In most of these movies, Mohanlal played the role of the dominant hegemonic masculine hero, while Sreenivasan's characters were presented as the 'other' of the hero figure played by Mohanlal.

friendship and bonding, which is often, although subtly, rife with homoerotic tensions. Muraleedharan Tharayil, in his article titled "Queer Bonds: Male Friendships in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema,"[20] explored a similar idea. He argues that,

> "The so-called hegemonic straight culture in India can be seen to have many queer traits, and examination of this "queerness within the straight" can provide us with a better understanding of sexual subjectivities in this region"[21].

Tharayil observes that queerness, understood as an attitude and a way of responding that transcends the binary oppositions of gender (man versus woman) and sexuality (homo versus hetero), is highly valuable for appraising the diverse libidinal subjectivities present in regions like South Asia. Historically, these regions have shown little evidence of religious or social repression of non-heterosexual orientations until the onset of colonial domination. As a reading strategy, queerness, according to Tharayil, focuses on any expression that can be identified as contra-, non-, or anti-straight.

In his article titled "Shifting Paradigms: Gender and Sexuality Debates in Kerala" [22], Muraleedharan Tharayil historicises the gender and sexuality debate in Kerala with a specific focus on emerging queer moments in contemporary Kerala. He traces the impact of social reform movements, queer movements, sex-worker's movements, and regional cinema on sexuality debates in Kerala. As a gay man living in Kerala, Tharayil's writing offers a nuanced reading of cultural texts that exposes the anti-queer representational politics embedded in them, especially in film texts.

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[20] Muraleedharan Tharayil, "Queer Bonds: Male Friendships in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema," in *Queering India* (Routledge, 2002).

[21] Tharayil, 181.

[22] Muraleedharan Tharayil, "Shifting Paradigms: Gender and Sexuality Debates in Kerala," *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 17 (2014): 70–78.

Meena T Pillai's "The Many Misogynies of Malayalam Cinema,"[23] offers a critical commentary on the phenomenon of male superstardom in the Malayalam film industry from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. According to her, "the aporia of Kerala's modernity that results in certain retrograde tendencies is most evident in its cinematic discourses, especially those built around its investment in male superstardom". She examines the impact of the newly liberalised economy on Malayalam cinema to argue that it resulted in the 'syndicatisation' of the Malayalam film industry, which contributed to the propensity to control and regimentalise artists and technicians. She examines the legitimisation of 'misogyny' in cinema in relation to the constructed hegemonic image of the 'male-superstars' like Mohanlal. In her article titled "The Feudal Lord Reincarnate: Mohanlal and the Politics of Malayali Masculinity"[24], Pillai explores the phenomenon that she calls "refeudalisation". This refers to the return of the 'feudal nostalgia' to popular Malayalam films through heroic characters like Jagannathan in *Aaram Thampuran*[25] and Neelakandan in *Devasuram*[26], played by Mohanlal. She analyses a set of characters played by Mohanlal from the late 1990s to early 2000s to argue that there is an embedded feudal nostalgia in most of the films during this period that normalises misogyny and rejects and ridicules non-hegemonic forms of masculinities.

Ratheesh Radhakrishnan's doctoral dissertation titled "Masculinity and the Structuring of Public Domain in Kerala: A History of the Contemporary"[27] offers a detailed study of the structuring of a 'masculine public domain' in Kerala during the late 1990s. Using debates

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[23] Meena T Pillai, "The Many Misogynies of Malayalam Cinema," *Economic and Political Weekly* 52, no. 33 (2017): 52–58.

[24] Meena T Pillai, "The Feudal Lord Reincarnate: Mohanlal and the Politics of Malayali Masculinity.," in *Indian Film Stars: New Critical Perspectives*, Michael Lawrence Ed. (British Film Institute, 2020).

[25] *Aaram Thamburan*, Action, Drama (Revathi Kalamandir, 1997).

[26] *Devasuram*, Action, Drama, Thriller (Anugraha Arts, 1993).

[27] Radhakrishnan, "Masculinity and the Structuring of Public Domain in Kerala: A History of the Contemporary."

around an incident of sexual harassment that occurred in 1999, his thesis argues for a "conjunctural understanding of the contemporary where various events and moments in history are replayed through narrativization and popular memory". By analysing materials like news reports, speeches and, articles surrounding the sexual harassment incident, he reveals the various ways in which masculinity as an institution is structured in Kerala. He argues that, "the public engendered by the incident he discusses foregrounds the public sphere that constitutes the region as one among the many possible publics in contemporary Kerala"[28]. A similar concern is addressed in the recent work by Yacob Thomas, who analysed Malayalam novels from late 17th century to the mid-19th century by focusing on the impact of modernity on the formation of the "masculine identity" in Kerala[29].

Hegemonic Masculinity

This research studies contemporary manifestations of masculinity in Kerala and the ways in which notions related to hegemonic masculinity are produced and maintained in the region. Coined by Raewyn Connell, the term Hegemonic masculinity refers to a set of practises which legitimise the claims of patriarchy by maintaining the subordination of women and other marginal forms of masculinity. The early theorisation of hegemonic masculinity appears in the essay "Towards a New Sociology of Masculinity"[30] by Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell and, John Lee. Published in 1985, this essay extensively critiqued the 'male sex role' literature and proposed a model of multiple masculinities to theorise power relations among men and between

[28] Radhakrishnan, 3.

[29] Yacob Thomas, "Modernity and Masculinity A study of Keralite Gender formation based on the Novels from the Ghathakavadham 1877 and Nalukettu 1958" (PhD Thesis, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, 2019), http://hdl.handle.net/10603/357223.

[30] Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell, and John Lee, "Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity," *Theory and Society* 14, no. 5 (1985): 551–604.

men and women. This article reviews work done in the field of feminist criticism that focuses on sex role theory.

Raewyn Connell's book *Masculinities*, originally published in 1993, is a foundational text in men and masculinity studies. Connell illustrates how gender research that has focused on psychoanalysis, sociology, and gender role theory has failed to produce a "coherent science of masculinity". Conell defines masculinity as a collection of practices within a system of gender relations. According to Connell, the term masculinity in its modern use derives from European individuality, which evolved with the growth of colonial empires and capitalist economies. Therefore, masculinity, in the sense that we use it, is a relatively novel concept. As Connell notes in chapter 2 of *Masculinities*, masculinity is a relational term which is always defined in opposition to femininity.

Connell argues in *Masculinities* that gender is one of the ways in which social practises are organised. These practises relate to reproduction and human bodily structures. The practise of gender is not limited to isolated actions but also to branched arrays referred to by Connell as 'collections of gender practises'. Connell also describes how institutions are gendered not only as metaphors but also in an active manner. The state, for example, is gendered since state's organisational practices are constructed in relation to the field of reproduction. The fact that it is still mostly men who hold key positions of power in the state is not only the reason for the state's masculine outlook but also its outcome.

In "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept" published in 2005, R W Connell and James W Messerschmidt attempt a reworking of the concept of hegemonic masculinity in the light of various studies that utilised the theory to understand gender relations. This essay also responds to various criticisms against the theory originally proposed in 1993. The concept of hegemonic masculinity has influenced gender studies across many academic fields and has

also attracted serious criticism. The authors trace "the origin of the concept in a convergence of ideas in the early 1980s and map the ways in which it was applied when research on men and masculinities expanded. Evaluating the principal criticisms, the authors defend the underlying concept of masculinity, which in most research use is neither reified nor essentialist"[31]. The authors argue that the treatment of the subject in research on hegemonic masculinity can be improved with the aid of recent psychological models, although limits to discursive flexibility must be recognised. The authors review what has been confirmed from early formulations (the idea of multiple masculinities, the concept of hegemony, and the emphasis on change) and what needs to be discarded (one-dimensional treatment of hierarchy and trait conceptions of gender).

Gender performativity Theory

Judith Butler's work is considered a foundational exploration of the socially constructed nature of gender. In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*[32] (1990), Butler argues that gender is a performative 'redoing' of acts, gestures and discourses which, over time, constructs the illusion of the existence of a coherent 'essential' gender. Butler introduced the concept of performativity in her essay titled "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory"[33] published in 1988. Butler closely examines the notion of performance in *Gender Trouble*. Butler critiques the traditional understanding that gender identity is fixed. According to Butler, gender's meaning changes based on the cultural context in which it is acted out. Since gender is variable, its meaning can

[31] Raewyn Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829.

[32] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Taylor & Francis, 2011), https://books.google.co.in/books?id=2S0xAAAAQBAJ.

[33] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31, https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893.

shift with each performance depending on the situation. Butler believes that gender is not fixed or universal but rather temporary, changeable, and performed. She rejects the notion that there are essential, stable identities and meanings for gender or that there is authenticity, authority, universality, and objectivity in the enactment of gender roles. She proposed in *Gender Trouble* that,

> "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being"[34].

Butler also challenged the traditional idea that gender is strictly binary. She noted that there are numerous ways to express and experience gender beyond this simplistic framework. This view opposes the notion that gender is solely determined by biological sex and emphasises the fluidity and diversity of gender identities. According to her "the persistent belief that gender is a binary condition is the problem, not the solution". In *Gender Trouble*, Butler also examines how gender norms and expectations are maintained through disciplinary power. She argued that gender is created and reinforced by a system of power that aims to regulate and control people. This power works through institutions like the family, marriage, the state, and through cultural norms.

In *Bodies that Matter,* published in 1993, Butler addresses some misconceptions that have accompanied both the popularity and the notoriety of *Gender Trouble*. Concentrating on what is meant by the 'materiality' of the body, she examines the forcible production of 'sex', and how they can contribute to their own subversion. She challenged essentialist views on sex and gender. Butler analyses the implications of exclusion and develops the notion of abjection (exclusion) as a category with subversive potential. From Butler's perspective, the body

[34] Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

cannot function or exist outside a cultural construction. Butler maintains that the materiality of bodies is itself a social/historical/cultural construct. Particularly, in this book, Butler raises the question of whether there is a "way to link the question of the materiality of the body to the performativity of gender"[35].

Internet-meme studies

In his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*[36], Richard Dawkins introduces the term 'meme' to refer to a cultural equivalent to the biological 'gene'. In other words, memes are the cultural corollaries to the genes, through which cultural information is transferred and shared through the process of imitation. In Dawkins' view, nearly everything cultural – from architectural styles to the "Happy Birthday song" – is a meme. A "meme" is an idea that operates within the mind similar to how gene or virus functions within the body. An infectious idea, often referred to as a viral meme, can spread from one mind to another in much the same way that viruses spread from person to person. Like genes, memes are replicators that experience variation, competition, selection, and retention. Dawkins envisioned memes as spreadable ideas, analogous, to genes in biology.

The publication of Limor Shifman's book *Memes in Digital Culture*[37] was a crucial moment in the field of meme studies where she attempts to theorise the phenomenon of memes. Shifman expands on Dawkins's original concept of memes to include Internet memes, which she defines as "the propagation of items such as jokes, rumours, videos, and websites from person to person via the Internet"[38]. Shifman's definition does not limit the term to image

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[35] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Routledge, 1993), 2, https://books.google.co.in/books?id=ZqiIgwQiyFYC.

[36] Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

[37] Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (The MIT Press, 2014), http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bs14s.

[38] Shifman, 2.

macros and other "Photoshopped" images typically associated with Internet memes. Instead, it also encompasses simpler forms of communication, such as basic text messages. Another important attribute of Internet memes is their tendency to share common characteristics with other related memes, much like Dawkins's memes, which are based on an original cultural element initiated by one person. Shifman notes that three primary issues must be resolved before memes in digital culture can be meaningfully integrated into academia and industry. First, there must be consensus on an exact definition of "meme." Second, the competing term "viral" must be clearly distinguished from the concept of memes. Finally, more studies are required to examine the practises and politics behind memes[39]. Shifman's research has been crucial in initiating discussions on Internet memes and their political implications within the academic domain.

Ryan M Milner's book *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* [40], published in 2016, discusses how memetic media- "aggregate texts that are collectively created, circulated, and transformed—become a part of public conversations that shape broader cultural debates". Milner writes that memetic media offer participation through reappropriation, blending new iterations with established ideas. New commentary is created through the mediated circulation and transformation of old ideas, allowing small strands to weave together large conversations. He explores how memetic media empower and exclude during public conversations, investigating the potential for the public voice amidst everyday antagonisms. Milner argued that memetic media enable many voices to participate even in the face of persistent inequality. This new form of participatory conversation, he contends, complicates traditional culture industries. According to him, "When age-old

[39] Shifman, 7.

[40] Ryan M Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT press, 2016), https://archive.org/details/worldmademepub0000miln.

gatekeepers interact with new ways of sharing information, the relationship between collective participation and individual expression becomes more ambivalent"[41].

Bradly E Wiggins' book *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture: Ideology, Semiotics, and Intertextuality*[42]examines instances of cultural, economic, and political critique expressed through the intentional production and consumption of internet memes. Often featuring images, animated GIFs, or videos, these memes are remixed to include intertextual references, frequently from popular culture, paired with a joke or critiques of some aspect of the human experience. According to the author, ideology, semiotics, and intertextuality converge in the process by which internet memes constitute a new form of meaning-making, with their rapid production and dissemination highlighting their significance.

Identifying the research gap

One of the aims of this research is to examine how masculinities are constructed and maintained in contemporary Kerala. Previous studies on masculinity in Kerala have explored topics such as matriliny, liberalization, migration, films, and the public sphere. However, these studies have not adequately considered the new forms of texts that have emerged with recent technological advancements. For example, there has been insufficient research on men's interaction with digital media in the context of Kerala. This research aims to address this gap.

In addition, this research explores the relationship between men's homosocial bonding and the formation of hegemonic masculinity in Kerala. While ethnography is a valuable methodology for studying masculinities in India, recent scholarship on masculinity in Kerala

[41] Milner, 12.

[42] B.E. Wiggins, *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture: Ideology, Semiotics, and Intertextuality*, Routledge Advances in Internationalizing Media Studies (Routledge, 2020), https://books.google.co.in/books?id=XfO5zQEACAAJ.

has not made sufficient use of this approach. Except for a few studies (Cariline and Filippo Osella[43] [44], Lars Aaberg[45], Gayathri Balu[46]), ethnography has not been adequately employed to study masculinities. The sixth chapter of this thesis focuses on an all-male collective from rural Kerala to investigate the different ways in which regional versions of masculinities are constructed. This chapter examines various cultural contexts in which masculinity is performed, such as men's friendship groups and playgrounds.

Chapters

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter, "Introduction" lays out the fundamental concerns addressed in the research. This section lists the aims of the study and describes the methodology used in the research. The first chapter also contains a literature review.

Chapter Two "Theoretical Foundations of the Research" provides a detailed overview of the theoretical basis of this research. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and R W Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity and multiple masculinities, form the basis of this study. This chapter also pays attention to the concept of intersectionality to argue that masculinity is an intersectional construct.

Chapter Three- "Introduction to Meme Studies" historicises the field of meme studies and discusses the various analytical tools that are foundational to this academic field. This

[43] Osella and Osella, "Friendship and Flirting."

[44] Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella, *Men and Masculinities in South India* (Anthem Press, 2006), http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1gsmzbv.

[45] Lars Olav Aaberg, "Men, Masculinities and Self-Help Groups: An Ethnographic Study from an Urban Slum in Kerala, India" (Master thesis, 2016), https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/51254.

[46] Gayatri Balu, "Masculinity and Marriage: Interrogating Possession among Velichappad Men of Northern Kerala," *Men and Masculinities* 25, no. 5 (December 1, 2022): 765–81, https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X221104101.

chapter discusses the increasing recognition that meme studies have garnered in India, especially on the political significance of memes. This section also elaborates on the various ways in which meme communication in India differs from other regions like the US and UK. This chapter also attempts to provide an overview of the rise of memes as a popular means of online communication in Kerala.

Chapter Four- "Memeing Masculinities" examines the representation of caste-class-inflected masculinities on social media platforms to understand the link between the structuring of hegemonic masculinity and the caste-class positions of men. A stereotypical identity type found in Malayalam memes called *Colony Vanam* is analysed here to study how such memetic constructions facilitate the subordination and marginalisation of non-hegemonic masculinities in Kerala. This chapter argues that the 'invention' of non-dominant masculinity types is crucial to maintaining hegemonic masculinity in Kerala.

Chapter Five- "*Moothon*: Problematising gender stereotypes in Malayalam regional cinema" attempts a critical reading of a 2019 Malayalam movie *Moothon*, by focusing on the representation of homosexual masculinities in Malayalam cinema. This chapter also attempts to historicise the representation of homosexuality in Malayalam cinema.

Chapter Six- "Homosociality and the Structuring of Hegemonic Masculinity in Kerala" is an ethnographic study of a men's group in Kerala, using homosociality as its central theme. This chapter attempts to establish links between the practise of homosociality among men and the structuring of hegemonic masculinity in rural Kerala.

Chapter Seven outlines future research possibilities in this field.

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